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DoD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

MR. MORRELL: Good afternoon. Pleased to be with you all today. As many of you know, this is my first briefing as a father of newborn twins. So if I doze off here at the podium, please forgive me and nudge me. I have a very brief opening statement and then will be happy to take your questions.

The Defense Department congratulates the Iraqi security forces on their successful rescue of journalist Richard Butler yesterday. The veteran cameraman was kidnapped by terrorists on February the 10th while on assignment for CBS News in Basra. He was held hostage for more than two months and then was finally freed yesterday when soldiers from Iraq's 14th Division, acting on a tip, raided a house outside of Basra, captured a terrorist and liberated the cameraman.

The operation showed great initiative and demonstrated the increasing capability of Iraq's security forces to take on the terrorists and extremists who are trying to derail the progress in Iraq. Of course, the Iraqi military still has a long way to go, as was demonstrated by their uneven performance in Basra a couple of weeks ago. However it is slowly but surely becoming a professional fighting force.

Lita.

Q Geoff, can you bring us up to date on the investigation into the Taiwan missile delivery, I'm sorry, the fuse delivery? The secretary was supposed to get a report from Admiral Donald, I believe, by today.

Did he get any sort of written report? Was there a meeting between the two of them? And can you tell us what you can on any preliminary results of the investigation?

MR. MORRELL: I can tell you that in a matter of less than two hours, the secretary will meet with Admiral Donald. He has, as you know, spent much of the morning up on the Hill, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee. But it is on his schedule for this afternoon to spend, I believe, about a half-an-hour with Admiral Donald.

This, as you know, was outlined in the original tasking letter the secretary put out in the wake of this incident, in which he gave Admiral Donald 60 days to conduct this investigation, but he also wanted a preliminary brief on the progress of the investigation. So that's what he's going to get this afternoon.

As I think we made clear at the outset, we will not be discussing any of his findings, initial as they may be, until such time as the investigation is complete. And I still think that has some time to go yet. I think it's not due to be complete until late in May, if my math is correct.

Yes?

Q Can you help me understand how it is that there are 163,000 troops in Iraq now that you're even beyond the halfway point of pulling the surge brigades out? And 163,000 is even higher than what was originally expected when the surge was announced, for all five BCTs. Now you have three out. How do you have 163,000 troops?

MR. MORRELL: You know, I am not actually, Kristin, the best person to ask in terms of the daily numbers as to where we are in terms of status of forces in Iraq. I mean, I think that's really an MNF-I question. Now, if you want me to sort of sit here and -- or stand here and offer up theories as to why indeed we're at north of 160,000 troops in Iraq as we are drawing down the surge brigades, I can offer them to you, but they won't be as educated as the answers you will get from MNF-I.

Q Well because what we hear are transitional issues and left seat/right seat stuff, but still, 163,000 after three BCTs have been pulled out doesn't --

MR. MORRELL: Well, we're not -- I think it would be inaccurate to characterize three BCTs as completely out at this point. We are in the process of bringing the 17th BCT out. It is not completely out of country yet.

Q (Off mike) -- General Petraeus said that on the Hill last week -- (off mike).

MR. MORRELL: My understanding is, in talking with MNF-I, that the 17th brigade combat team is in the process of exiting the country but has not completely done so yet. So that could account for some of those increased numbers. But as you pointed out, we make it a real priority to have, as we call it, left seat/right seat, in which you have returning units and deploying units overlapping for some period of time so as they can show each other the lay of the land and so that the incoming units are familiar with the territory before they assume complete responsibility.

So -- but, you know, clearly it is our goal, and you heard it from the president, from the secretary of Defense, from the chairman, from the commanding general of MNF-I -- we want to be down by -- or we are determined, we are pledged to be down to 15 brigade combat teams in Iraq come the end of July. Obviously, that will get us significantly less than 160,000 troops. But there are also enablers that go to support these troops.

And one of the reasons that our numbers have remained higher than people had expected was the fact that General Petraeus felt it necessary to retain more enablers, even as he was drawing down some of the combat forces, because those enablers not just helped our guys, but help the Iraqis as they get on their feet.

My understanding is that General Petraeus has found the ability to do without some of those enablers, so you will be seeing

more enablers coming out as you see these brigade combat teams coming out as well.

I'm sorry if that's not a satisfactory answer. I'm just not the expert on that one.

Jennifer.

Q Geoff, why did the secretary say on Sunday that he is not concerned about the fighting that is taking place against Shi'a militias? And why is he not concerned that they could spill over to Iran or get the U.S. involved in a proxy war with Iran?

MR. MORRELL: You know, I forget the exact quote the secretary -- I think that Mr. Schieffer was trying to note a distinction between how the urgency with which he spoke of the situation with Iran and their meddling in Iraq and how other of the administration have spoken of it. I don't detect any real difference in how this administration views the malign influence of Iran in Iraq. We all take it extraordinarily seriously and we're all determined to stop it.

And as you heard him say last week, one of the good results of the Basra operation was the realization to the Iraqi government that indeed Iran is having a far greater impact in the south of their country, as the secretary calls it, on their economic heart-line, than even they had imagined. And so now you are seeing, really, across the political spectrum in Iraq a realization that they have to do something about the meddling nature of Iran. And you are seeing a renewed focus on that from the Iraqi government, which we, of course, welcome.

And what's more -- and I think the secretary spoke about this in an interview last week as well -- Iraq's Arab neighbors welcome it. One of the great by-products of the Basra operation has been that Iraq's Arab neighbors realize, perhaps for the first time, the nationalistic intentions of the Iraqi government. They do not view them as the sectarian, you know, Shi'a-dominated government that they had believed them to be for so long and are now seeing a much more nationalistic bent. And perhaps we'll see more engagement by Iraq's Arab neighbors.

Q But the secretary did not see this as a potential proxy war between the U.S. and Iran, but is it?

MR. MORRELL: I have not heard the secretary speak of it in those terms. I think he clearly condemns, you know, the Iranian meddling.

Lord knows we found stashes and stashes of weapons in Basra a couple of weeks ago that were clearly provided by the Iranians and that Lord knows that the rockets and the missiles that have been falling upon the Green Zone, attacking and killing not just U.S. personnel there but Iraqis -- and I should remind everybody that the Iraqi government lives and functions within the Green Zone -- that those were provided by the Iranians. So this is a threat not just to coalition forces and American personnel, but to the very government of Iraq, and I think they realize that threat and are determined to do something about it.

Q Geoff, I don't know if you saw General McNeill in the Baltimore Sun saying that -- projecting that we would have -- need at least as many troops as we now have in Afghanistan and perhaps more until at least 2011. Is that a view shared by the secretary?

MR. MORRELL: Well, I think the secretary, as evidenced by the fact that he was so determined to get a vision statement out of the NATO summit in Bucharest, illustrates that he believes that all of us engaged in Iraq need to view this beyond the near term and see this as a much longer-term mission than we have. This is not just about this year, next year, or even the year after that. This is a three- to five-year mission that we need to be focused on.

So if you're asking me if he sees this as something that we need to be committed to for the next half decade or more, I would say yes. I don't know if we can project, at this point, what the troop levels will be and what the troop requirements will be three to five years down the line, but clearly the United States government and our coalition partners in Afghanistan need to be viewing the threat there as one that needs to be combated not just this year, next year, but at least five years down the line.

Go ahead, Joe.

Q Geoff, what is the message comes out of the two incidents today in Baqubah and Ramadi? Do you think that the situation in Iraq is getting worse?

MR. MORRELL: I certainly don't think the situation in Iraq is getting worse. Obviously, the bombings that took place today in Baqubah and Ramadi are tragic. They were deadly, and we mourn all the loss -- those that lost their lives and their families, who are suffering. But we would not view this as a sign that the situation is getting worse. All the statistics, everything that we monitor in terms of violence, civilian deaths, sectarian killings, all the trend lines are pointing down.

They have been for months. They continue to trend that way.

There have been spikes along the way. General Petraeus has noted those. We have noted those. But in terms of a month-to-month trend line, violence continues to diminish in Iraq.

There are horrific and spectacular exceptions to those trend lines, as we saw today in Baqubah and Ramadi. But overall, the trend is in the right direction.

Q Can I just push you on that a little bit?

MR. MORRELL: Yes.

Q Because General Petraeus's own charts show that March was not consistent with that. In virtually all those categories, it started looking a little worse in March. Here in April, certainly in terms of the U.S. casualties, it's looking like this just may be the worst month of the year so far.

At what point do you say, hey, maybe things are starting to at least not move in the right direction in Iraq?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, I mean, I think those are the kind of things that are being looked at by commanders in Iraq. They're the ones who chart that. They're the ones who painstakingly review it, to try to gather and glean whatever trends they can from it.

My sense at this point, and I've just listened, as you listened, to General Petraeus speak before Congress for several hours - - I've listened to him speak to the secretary -- is that he at this point does not see a diminishing of the security situation in Iraq, a worsening of the security situation in Iraq.

Clearly there have been recent spikes. Perhaps that is the enemy trying to make hay before the general's testimony before Congress. They are acutely aware of our political process here, and al Qaeda has made it a habit of trying to exploit it.

But at this point, I have heard no one, in any position of authority, pronounce any concern that the progress we have made security-wise is unraveling or trending in the wrong direction.

Yeah, hi.

Q Thank you Geoff. Is there any chance that transfer of wartime operational control will be re-negotiated under the new government in South Korea?

MR. MORRELL: The president of South Korea, I think, is visiting Washington later this week. And I'm sure all manners of South Korean- U.S. relations will be discussed.

I am not aware of any update to operation control being changed at this point, but perhaps I can inquire about it after this and get back to you. But I think those are sort of the things that are going to be discussed. I believe the secretary is going to meet with the new South Korean president and then will go out, I believe this weekend, to Camp David with the president as he hosts the new president of the Republic of Korea this weekend.

Jim. You're happy?

Q You were saying in Basra they found caches and caches of Iranian weapons. How are they getting into the country?

MR. MORRELL: Well, how have they been getting into the country for weeks or months if not years now? I mean, there clearly is some sort of underground system -- not literally underground, but a smuggling system -- in which the Iranians are providing their allies within Iraq, these special groups, with the munitions that are then used to take on us, whether it be EFPs or rockets or conventional arms. These are being used by these special groups and being provided by the Iranians.

As to how they exactly get in the country, that is clearly a mystery to us, because if we knew exactly the route lines we would be taking them on. In fact, we are taking them on where we do know them to exist. But clearly, the border is porous enough at this point that they are still able to get in. And that is a great deal of concern to us.

Q Geoff, I've got a personnel question. How long can the CENTCOM post remain unfilled? Do you have any --

MR. MORRELL: Well, it's not unfilled.

Q Well, it's -- you know, you don't have a permanent replacement to, you know, the most important combatant command post currently.

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, you're absolutely right, we do not have a permanent replacement. But I think Admiral Fallon stepped down, I believe, less than three weeks ago. I think it's less than three weeks ago.

In his stead, Lieutenant General Dempsey, who has been his deputy for nearly a year now, stepped in. And he clearly knows CENTCOM well and knows the issues and the personnel he has to work with. And I've been in several meetings with him since then. He seems to be more than up to the job. I know he has another job which he's going on to, so he won't be the one, it seems, to replace Admiral Fallon.

But I can tell you the secretary has, as I told you he would, begun now this process of finding a permanent replacement to Admiral Fallon at CENTCOM.

Obviously our focus had been leading up to the testimony of General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, as well as the secretary and the chairman testifying themselves. Now that that is behind us, I think, you will see even more focused attention on picking a replacement or recommending a replacement to the president for CENTCOM.

Q Any sense of a timeline?

MR. MORRELL: I said at the time, when this first happened, that we would have -- that I would not expect to have somebody in, as a replacement to Admiral Fallon, until May. And I still would --

Q So you're talking confirmed and through the whole process?

MR. MORRELL: A new CENTCOM commander: I would not expect that until May.

I think you will likely see a recommendation to the president, perhaps even a nomination, before then. But in terms of having somebody in the post, I think, you know, that's just a couple weeks away. We've got some work to do before then.

Q Has he begun to interview?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not going to get into the precise process in terms of whether or not he's interviewed them, or how many names were presented to them, and who they might be.

I can just tell you, as I think I did a couple of weeks ago, that he had had his first meeting about this. I think I last spoke to you guys two weeks ago. He had his first meeting about this, I think, that very day. And there obviously are subsequent discussions.

Q Is General Petraeus considered a candidate?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not going to get into who or --

Q Can you give us the shortlist?

MR. MORRELL: I'll see you afterwards about the shortlist, Jonathan.

All right.

Q Are there any updates on missile defense in Europe?

MR. MORRELL: Well, I think we had an update when they were in Bucharest last week or the week before. They shared the news, I think -- you were on that trip, weren't you, Fred -- that a deal had been reached with the Czech Republic on the radar, and that it's not formally been consummated yet. But we expect that to be shortly, and our discussions with the Poles continue.

We are always optimistic, but this is a negotiation. It takes a little bit of time. But I don't think there's a huge development there to report to you.

Yeah. Go ahead.

Q Japanese defense minister: He had a plan to visit, meet with Secretary Gates. That plan was cancelled.

Do you know the reason why?

MR. MORRELL: The Japanese defense minister?

Q Yes.

MR. MORRELL: I have not seen the Japanese defense minister on the secretary's schedule. I know he's met with several ministers of defense from Japan since he's come into office, as there's been a few changes in government in Japan.

So he has not shown a lack of willingness to meet with Japanese ministers of Defense. So -- but it's news to me if something was cancelled. I do not believe it was cancelled on this end. But it's the first I've heard of it; I can't tell you for certain. Sorry about that.

Yeah, Jim, you had your hand up?

Q Well, just to go back to the CENTCOM job. Could you give us a sense of the sort of background that the person -- that Secretary Gates is looking for? You know, what sort of background he's looking for, what sort of person he's looking for for that job.

MR. MORRELL: Aside from the obvious, Jim, I wouldn't be able to tell you what the exact criteria are that the secretary has articulated as what he's looking for. And I don't know, frankly, that he has articulated to anyone, "Find me a man that has X, Y and Z," or a woman, for that matter. Obviously, he wants somebody with integrity, with experience, with knowledge of the Middle East, a strategic thinker; you know, all of the characteristics you would want for --

Q (Off mike) -- Ph.D.?

MR. MORRELL: (Chuckles) Perhaps. Perhaps a Princeton Ph.D. No, come on. We're -- (laughter). Listen, we can go fishing all afternoon, but, you know, I'm not going to really help you out here. I'm sorry.

So, aside from personnel matters, somebody was -- your producer was fixated on personnel matters too, but she's not here to ask any questions.

Okay. Everybody okay? Thanks. Good to see you.